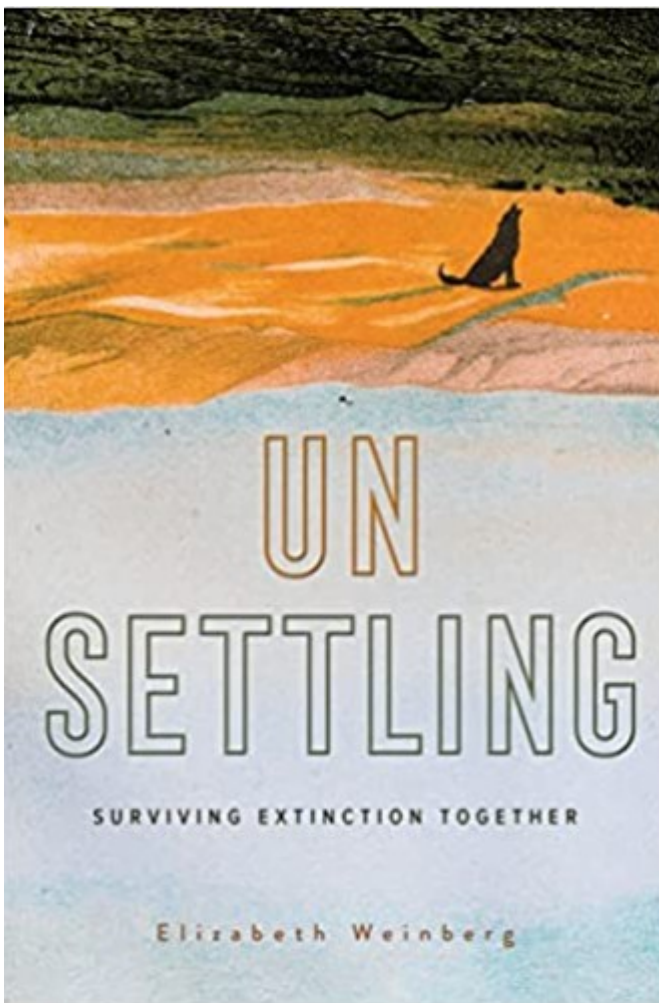


A reminder of what's worth saving

Elizabeth Weinberg's call to climate action highlights the interconnection of all things.

by [Victoria Wick](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

In Review



Unsettling

Surviving Extinction Together

By Elizabeth Weinberg

Broadleaf Books

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That the climate crisis poses an existential threat to humanity is no longer up for debate, as heat waves intensify, wildfires proliferate, and sea levels rise. Earlier this year, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported for the first time that damage due to climate change is "irreversible," destroying any lingering hope that humans might undo the harm we have done. Scientists have long known there was a chance we would reach this point of no return, but the reality is still hard to stomach. There will be no restoring the world we once knew, but there remains the possibility—however diminishing—of a world with us in it.

Queer essayist and science communicator Elizabeth Weinberg writes for such a time as this. Although she describes herself as "not a religious person, or even someone who believes in a god," she writes with prophetic courage and clarity. The call to climate action has never been more urgent, and Weinberg doesn't shy away from how absolutely terrifying that is. *Unsettling* is a book for those of us who don't need to be convinced that climate action is a priority but who feel overwhelmed by the realities of climate devastation. In other words, it's probably a book for most of us.

Unsettling is part memoir, part call to action in the form of an extended essay in creative nonfiction. It unfolds in eight chapters with thematic titles like "Graveyard," "Wilds," and "Legacy," and in each one Weinberg introduces habitats and species to underscore the interconnectivity of all things. Weinberg is a science writer by profession, and it shows in her ability to translate Earth's biomes into compelling stories about resilience, grief, and the circle of life. She writes that coyotes can alter the size of their litters to control population growth and that decomposing whale carcasses provide an oasis of nutrients for more than 400 species on the ocean floor. She explains that sea level rise is deceptively difficult to predict and that glacial ice acts like a liquid rather than a solid. On every page, Weinberg reveals more of Earth's marvels, reminding readers of all there is worth saving.

For Weinberg, everything comes back to the interconnection of all things: climate change and Western colonialism, queer-coded Disney villains and queer resilience, the Land Back movement and the AIDS crisis, Weinberg's own relationship to nature and her journey to embrace her queerness. She tries to do too much in fewer than 200 pages, but it's a testament to how interesting she is as a writer and thinker that

the book doesn't particularly suffer for its meandering style. *Unsettling* reads like an unfinished intellectual autobiography of the ideas and stories that have radicalized her, and it turned out to be exactly the kind of climate book I didn't know I needed. Weinberg models how to keep growing and searching for hope, and it made me feel a bit better.

Unsettling's central narrative re-traces a path through Weinberg's life and self-discovery. She writes that she "grew up in nature"—as much as someone can when they live in Washington, DC. She describes formative experiences hiking along the Potomac River with her dad as a child, rock climbing with her brothers as a preteen, and backpacking through the northern Alaskan mountains at age 15. Despite her extensive wilderness experience, Weinberg writes that she "didn't know how to be queer and in the outdoors at the same time"—because as a queer woman on the trails, she felt like an anomaly. She contextualizes her feelings of being an outsider with a brief history of the National Park Service, which she sums up as having been "created by white men to exercise their masculinity."

Weinberg takes every opportunity to remind her readers that marginalized groups have long endured the brunt of human greed's unintended consequences, and she reviews the United States' history of attempted extinction events—against Indigenous tribes, Black communities, queer families, and any other living being considered a blight. These buried histories are stories of resilience, and they inspire a simple yet radical idea: the communities that have already survived attempts at their annihilation possess the wisdom that will help all of us avoid extinction together.

Unsettling made me reflect on how challenging it is to persist in long-term justice work without the spiritual resources of a cultural or religious tradition. Weinberg knows this is especially true for queer folks who have left unsupportive religions or families of origin, and she makes the compelling suggestion that the wilderness can serve as both spiritual tradition and ancestor for anyone who chooses it. She wants us to recognize our kinship with the rest of the natural world, and she prescribes spiritual remedies to support us in our efforts for climate justice, namely, practices of lamentation, repentance, and worship. She writes, "We have to learn to grieve for this planet and everything we've done. . . . We have to see the beauty in this world and be willing to give up everything—our settler ways, our iPhones, our plane rides, our belief that it isn't worth trying—to keep it alive."

Weinberg comes to a deceptively simple conclusion by encouraging readers to spend time in nature and to start imagining a different way of life. *Unsettling* is a timely call to climate action, but it's also an inadvertent translation of that paradoxical gospel message: you must lose your way of life in order to save it.